The violence of disablism

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Abstract

This paper addresses the multi-faceted nature of violence in the lives of disabled

people, with a specific focus on the accounts of disabled children and their families.

Traditionally, when violence and disability have been considered together, this has

emphasised the disabled subject whom inevitably exhibits violent challenging

behaviour. Recently, however, more attention has been paid to violence experienced

by disabled people, most notably in relation to hate crime. This paper embraces

theories that do not put the problems of disablism or violence back onto disabled

people but magnify and expose processes of disablism that are produced in the

relationships between people, which sometimes involve violence. This, we argue,

means taking seriously the role of social relationships, institutions and culture in the

constitution of violence. Disabled children, we argue, are enculturated by the violence

of disablism. We follow Žižek's (2008: 1) advice to step back from the obvious

signals of violence to 'perceive the contours of the background which generates such

outbursts', and identify four elements of the violence of disablism which we define as

real, psychoemotional, systemic and cultural. We come to the conclusion that

violence experienced by disabled children and their families says more about the

dominant culture of disablism than it does the acts of a few seemingly irrational,

unreasonable, mean, violent individuals. We conclude that there is a need for extensive cultural deconstruction and reformation.

Introduction

This paper explores the multi-faceted nature of violence in the lives of disabled people, with a specific focus on the accounts of disabled children and their families. We start this paper with three stories from a project:

> It's finding the people [to look after him] that could actually physically cope with my son. Because if he doesn't co-operate you have to manhandle him, to get him out of the door and, you know, he'll be punching you, kicking you (Roberta)

> My daughter has a good line in hand-biting and hitting people which really upsets the escort on the mini bus. I think at some point, if she actually manages to get the escort, I think he'll say, 'I'm not having that child on my bus ever again'. (Shelley)

> I had to restrain my son and he wasn't very happy about that and so he started hitting me. I was seeing stars and …. and my daughter was bright enough to phone the cops again. (Jane)

These accounts appear to support the idea that, for some disabled children at least, violence and impairment are knotted together as a pathological whole. This version of the mad/bad disabled body is not simply a well worn cultural trope to be found in popular cultural images (see Mitchell and Snyder, 2006) but testimony to the

dominance of a particular philosophy or epistemology of disability discourse. What is

immediately apparent when one starts to research violence and disability is the

dominance of functionalism. As Goodley (2010) notes early social and cultural

theories of disability were heavily influence by the structural-functionalist sociologist

Parsons (e.g. 1951), who saw the coherence of the social system as 'analogous to a

biological system – a system of social structures interacting and co-existing as a

consensual web of relationships' (Thomas, 2007: 16-17). Functionalism views

disability as a product of a damaged body or mind that 'struggles to escape the pitfalls

of essentialism and biological determinism' (Donaldson, 2002: 112). Functionalism is

a position that emphasizes the consensual nature of society; it starts and ends with

deficient individuals and the maintenance of these individuals and the social order. In

this sense, then, we could argue that functionalism underpins ableism: the social,

cultural and political conditions of contemporary life that emphasise ability and

denigrate disability. Campbell (2008a) argues that disabled people are pathologised

through the 'production, operation and maintenance of ableist-normativity' (2008a:

1). Functionalism serves to maintain the ableist consensus through the othering of

disabled people. Following Donaldson (2002: 112), disabled people are discharged

from the functionalist clinical episteme as pathological, problem-infused victims who

must place themselves in the hands of authorities – such as medicine – in order to

follow 'illness management regimes'. Consequently, good patients/disabled people

are deferent, dependent, compliant and non-violent (Greenop, 2009). This dual

assessment of problem and compliance to treatment ensures that huge disability

industries have grown in the service of functionalism. Medicalisation, psychological

therapies and specialist educational interventions have spiraled in terms of their

application in the lives of disabled people. *Journal of Applied Behaviour Analysis*,

Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability, *Journal of Learning Disabilities and Offending Behaviour* all have published papers that seek to understand, rehabilitate and cure the flawed and impaired individual. A recurring theme within all these publications is a common functionalist trope: the disabled subject that inevitably exhibits challenging behaviour often manifesting itself through violence. Indeed, one could view our accounts presented above as evidence for the hostile and handicapped disabled subject.

Some more critical appraisals of challenging behaviour have depicted this phenomenon as a tragic and secondary handicap of living with an impairment (Sinason, 1992). These accounts attempt to spin a sociological explanation about the violence of disabled people. They understand hitting out and biting, exhibited by Shelley's daughter, as less the functionalist consequence of having an impairment and more a maladaptive response to living with impairment and the associated experiences of professional control, segregation and parental protection. Violence occurs at the intersections of impairment and environment and might be understood as frustration, learnt helplessness or attempts to communicate. Moreover, the accounts presented above, might be understood as examples of justified anger that boil over in social environments which, more often than not, exclude disabled children. While we welcome these more critical reviews, our paper seeks to do something different. We understand impairment as a biological, cognitive, sensory or psychological difference that is framed often within a medical context and disability as the negative social reaction to those differences (Sherry, 2007: 10). We understand disablism, following Thomas (2007: 73), as 'a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered

undermining of their psycho-emotional well being'. It is our contention that violence

and disability can only be understood in the contemporary culture of disablism. Our

aim, then, is not to individualise explanations for violence and place these within the

disabled individual – nor to consider violence as secondary handicaps – but 'to choose

action with respect to the real source of conflict – that is, towards social structures'

(Fanon, 1993: 100). We aim to embrace theories that do not put the problems of

disablism or violence back onto disabled people but magnify and expose processes of

disablism that are produced in the relationships between people. This means taking

seriously the role of institutions, culture and social relationships in the constitution of

violence. Disabled children, we argue, are enculturated into the violence of disablism.

This paper is timely in light of growing media reports of violence against disabled

adults and children (Sherry, 2000, 2010). At its most extreme, violence against

disabled people results in hate crime, a socio-political act that is finally being

acknowledged. A number of high profile cases of disabled adults and young people[i]

led the disability studies scholar Tom Shakespeare (2010, np) to write:

> David Askew's tragedy follows the deaths of Raymond Atherton, Rikki
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> Judkins … Fiona Pilkington, Christine Lakinski … over the last few years.
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> Each of these individuals was targeted because they were vulnerable and
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> disabled, exploited, humiliated, and finally killed. Looking again at the
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> evidence, and thinking more deeply about the problem, I realise how mistaken
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> I was to trivialise hate crime. It's not just a matter of bullying. It's not
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> something that people can just ignore or laugh off. It is a scourge on our
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> society. We are members of a community where the most vulnerable people

live in fear of their lives and where they are being terrified on a daily basis by the bored or the loutish or the dispossessed. I think my mental block arose because I did not want to believe that human beings could be so vile. I was wrong.

Shakespeare's reflexive account captures the multi-faceted nature of the violence of disablism. He asks, when does hate crime begin and bullying stop? How can we separate ignorance and hatred? Is violence against disabled people deeply ingrained in the psyches, social relationships and cultural practices of members of contemporary society? In our paper we consider the ways in which violence against disabled people – specifically children and their families – reflects a trenchant dimension of culture; in this case disablist culture. Drawing, in part, on Žižek's (2008) book *Violence*, we come to the conclusion that violence experienced by disabled children and their families says more about the dominant culture of disablism, and its effects upon the being of people, than it does the acts of a few seemingly irrational, mad, bad or mean violent individuals. Those that enact violence against disabled children should be understood in ways that recognize that the being of people is a socio-symbolic or culturally formed being (Žižek, 2008: 62). Disabled people experience violence because of contemporary society's deeply held contradictory discourses about dis/ability. While Shakespeare (2010) did not want to think that the protagonists of hate crime could be so vile, we did not want to think that acts against disabled children reflect common circulating practices of a contemporary culture of disablism. Sadly, accounts from our research suggest that we were wrong.

Methodology

To address the violence of disablism we explore the accounts of parents of disabled children. Their accounts have been collected as part of a two-year project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES – 062-23-1138) (http//www.rihsc.**mmu**.ac.uk/**postblair**project/): 'Does every child matter, Post-Blair: Interconnections of disabled childhoods'[ii]. We aim to understand what it means to be a disabled child growing up in England. The study is based in the north of England and runs from September 2008 – April 2011. The participants include disabled children aged 4-16, their parents/carers and professionals who work with disabled children, including teachers, third sector workers, health workers and social workers. The data for this paper, however, was gathered primarily from interviews with twenty parents/carers of disabled children and ethnographic research on the community lives of disabled children. The interviews were open-ended and covered a range of issues including families' experiences of health, social care, education and leisure. Children had a range of impairment labels including autism, cerebral palsy, developmental disability, Down Syndrome, achondroplasia, profound and multiple learning disability and epilepsy. Our ethnography involved one of us (Katherine) attending children's birthday parties, bowling, shopping with families. She was also invited to impairment-specific leisure activities, including an autism specific social club, parent groups, and user consultation meetings set up by local authorities, services and professionals to access the views of families. A few of the families involved in the interviews were also involved in the ethnography but the latter was extended to include different children and their families. Finally, our research also included focus group interviews with professionals ranging from teachers, social workers, speech pathologists, advocates, and leisure providers. In the course of the analysis we visited and re-visited the data to search for themes (Snow et al, 2004)

with two emphases in mind: (i) to search for accounts of violence and (ii) to seek rich data: that speaks of the lives of disabled children and their families. We feel it important to 'out ourselves' as this point in the paper. One of us (Katherine) is a mother of a disabled child. The other (Dan) is also a parent and has worked alongside disabled people with the label of learning difficulties who are engaged in their own politicization through their membership of a self-advocacy group. These experiences have, we feel, alerted us to some of the daily experiences of discrimination faced by disabled people. Before the project, we both shared the view that disablism is rife in our socio-cultural contexts. Our view has been clearly and tragically supported by our research. We want to acknowledge that we feel tensions in telling stories about violence. We worry that these accounts might feed into a voyeuristic interest in the tragic stories of disability. We are, also, anxious that in writing a research paper we are in danger of domesticating or objectifying very real stories of oppression. However, our attempts to take seriously the violence of disablism reveals deeply held cultural discourses around disability that require, not only our attention, but also our response.

Analysis

In the paper we explore four types of violence; real, psychoemotional, systemic and cultural. Each of these overlap with one another in ways that are correlated with three broad elements of disablism: the psyche, society and culture (Goodley, 2010, fc: 2). The psychological experience of violence acknowledges the complex ways in which the social and cultural world is produced through individuals. The psyche recognises the tight knot of the person and the social word, the self and other people, the individual and society. Societal and cultural forms of violence are reproduced through processes of domination, ideology and oppression that shape the inner world of our

psyches. Cultural, social and psychical forms of violence against disabled people reflect often subtle, mundane and everyday encounters with disablism.

Real violence

> She's had her moments, she got bullied by a girl on the school bus, they pinned her down and were putting tampons in her mouth but you know you don't always get the, but then I think well you can't fight against that can you. We stuck out on the bus a bit longer and then I thought no, so that's why we give her the lift. (Lesley)

> Because the thing that we've had with his school now, they don't tell any staff – he's actually been physically assaulted by a lunchtime supervisor and- she thought he'd been bullying her granddaughter, she hit him in the dining hall and said she'd 'bloody kill him' next time. (Gayle)

> The youth worker called me into her office. She looked dreadful, shocked. Eventually she told me that there had been an incident in the toilet. A group of girls had been teasing Isobel and they tried to get her to lick the toilet seat. There was a rumour that the whole thing had been videoed on a camera phone and posted on You Tube. (Alex)

> [The teacher] made Andrew participate with this lady in this event and he was absolutely screaming and tugging and I felt as a parent I wanted to be in there saying 'don't do this to my child', but part of me was thinking that's going to be seen as very reactive, and what's everybody else going to think and it is

only a two minute situation. But that to me gave me a greater take on possibly what had been going on in the months prior to that (Lucy).

Lucy suspected that what she had seen in the assembly was the tip of the iceberg. She wondered what had gone on when she wasn't there and was worried because she knew her son, who has a communication impairment, would not have been able to tell her (Katherine's ethnographic comments on Lucy's interview).

These accounts sadly confirm that the disabled body is, often, an easy target for what we might term real physical violence of non-disabled others. Alongside the numerous examples of hate crime documented by scholars such as Sherry (2010) we know too that between 1/3 and 1/10 of the disabled population have been sexually abused at some point in their lives (Brown and Craft, 1989). Real violence is experienced physically and psychologically. We appropriate the term 'real' here from psychoanalysis; specifically Lacanian theory (1977). The real of violence is an embodied encounter: of pain inflicted by one body on another. What we read here are real physical encounters with violence; pain, humiliation and, we could suggest, torture. Perhaps we also have evidence for violence enacted by 'evil' people; who are prepared to denigrate disabled children. However, for Lacan, while the real of flesh and bones might feel like the pre-discursive – the embodied, tangible, somatic individual outside of culture – we come to touch or feel the real through culture. The body is a cultural body and the physical act of violence is felt and interpreted through our relationships with others. Behind these real violent encounters described above are the socio-cultural conditions of disablism and their psychoemotional

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concomitants. Our sense is that it is too easy to relegate violence to the real acts of a few bad people. There are wider discourses and cultural conditions at play behind these real acts of violence. These conditions are of equal interest to us in our analysis of disablism. While, of course, we do not want to denigrate the feelings of the physical pain of violence – which feels very real – our commitment to an analysis of disablism means that we are interested in the wider socio-cultural and political factors that promote such real violence against disabled people. We recognize that there are practical, intellectual and ethical dangers in this analytical turn to the possible socio-cultural foundations of violence. Such a turn might be seen as negating the varying impact of violence upon victims whilst ignoring issues of intent and agency on the part of those enacting violence. However, if we accept that disablism exists, and that violence might be one of its manifestations, then we believe it is necessary to engage with social and cultural formations that permit forms of real violence against disabled people.

We follow Žižek's (2008: 1) advice to step back from the obvious signals of violence to 'perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts'. To look only at real physical violence 'obliterates from view the more subtle forms of violence' (Ibid: 9) that characterize society's encounters with disabled children and their families. Violent acts against disabled people can only be understood by reflecting on the wider circulating practices of a disablist culture.

Psycho-emotional violence

Critical disability studies have engaged with the psychological and affective aspects of disablism. In Britain, the work of Thomas (1999, 2007) and Reeve (2002, 2008) has crucially intervened in materialist sociological accounts of disablism by drawing

attention to the 'barriers in here' experienced by disabled people (Reeve, 2008: 1). Against a wide understanding of structural inequalities, psycho-emotional disablism interrogates the experiences between disabled people and disabling society. This interrogation has identified direct and indirect forms of discrimination:

> Direct forms can be found in discriminatory interactions, acts of invalidation, patronising responses of others and hate crimes such as the destruction of group symbols and hate literature (Sherry, 2000, 2010). Recent crime statistics from Britain suggest that 25% of disabled people report being victimised (Roulstone and Balderston, 2009). Indirect forms may be due to the side effects of structural disablism or unintended actions, words or deeds. The psycho-emotional refers to the impact of these ingredients of disablism on the ontological security or confidence of disabled people (Thomas, 1999). A key psychic reaction to such hostility is internalised oppression: the re-injuring of self through internalising discriminatory values (Marks, 1999), lowering self-worth and lessening a sense of intrinsic value (Thomas, 2007) (Goodley, 2010fc: 90).

Žižek (2008: 60) describes this as an *ontic violence*: a violence against being or existence: 'there is a direct link between ontological violence and the texture of social violence (of sustaining relations and enforced domination)' (Ibid: 61). Interpersonal forms of violence threaten to determine the 'very being and social existence of the interpreted subject' (Ibid: 62). The following narratives represent, for us, potent examples of psycho-emotional or ontic violence:

The administrators of the FaceBook page for supporters of the Every Disabled Child Matters[1] campaign have twice had to remove comments from the page full of hatred towards disabled children and their families. Although the comments have been removed swiftly and the people who made them reported and banned from FaceBook, it is hard to understand why someone would feel the need to take the time to join as a fan of the campaign and write an offensive message on the wall of the site. (Katherine's ethnographic notes)

So they [autism outreach teachers] went in with, you know the suggestions of how to do this – and one of the things was, "Well it becomes apparent that we don't understand when Sam's distressed or upset or anxious, maybe if we introduced a one to five scale, that's a simple way that he can communicate to us that he's feeling stressed." How did it go? Sam told the learning mentor he was at four and was approaching five, her response was, "Well how do you think I feel? I'm at a ten." Can you believe that? I … honestly … I nearly died when he told me. I was just speechless and he was like, "Are you alright mum?" and I said, "I'll be fine, just give me a minute." (Gayle).

The learning mentor's response foregrounds her own ontological needs and positions Sam as burden or stress trigger point. As enemies of the normate homelands of schools (Michalko, 2002), disabled children are often made to exist as outliers and aliens that threaten that homeland. We can only speculate about the impacts of such a reaction on Sam and his mother. One possibility is that such a disablist response threatens to inflict, following Marks (1999), ontological invalidation of Sam. His

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[1] See www.edcm.org.uk for details of the campaign

emotions are not only ignored but his very being is invalidated by the learning mentor who puts her own self first ('Well how do you think I feel?').

> They [social workers] said I was doing my masters and I shouldn't do my masters and I should look after him [Sally's son]. And they said he was going to school and I'd access some respite provision when he went to school. They said he was too young – that he should be staying in a parent's care. (Sally)

The underlying expectations held by social care professionals about this mother reflect discourses of 'good enough mothering' (whatever that might be), assumptions that a disabled child requires 24 hour full time care (preferably enacted by the mother only) and the valuing of feminised care over more 'selfish' ambitions of educational status on the part of the mother. Following Žižek's earlier observation, the mother is both interpreted and determined through professional discourse. This captures the 'asymmetrical character to intersubjectivity – there is never a balanced reciprocity in my encountering the subject' (Žižek, 2008: 53).

> [As part of a social services assessment] I had to describe Henry as autistic … I told them he has an IQ of 49. I had to explain that he couldn't do things that other children his age can do, that we can't leave him on his own, that he can't organise himself to get a meal, that he still needs help with his personal care, including washing his hair and wiping his bum, that we have to take him everywhere with us and that sometimes he doesn't want to go. She started to type 'he can't do things that normal fourteen year olds can do'. I said, 'I didn't say that he isn't 'not normal'. She apologised and said she didn't mean that she meant 'average'. (Imogen).

In the formalized routine of professional assessment this mother is incited to articulate an abnormal version of her child. Parents have reported to us many times that often it is less effort and more convenient to explain their children's health, demeanor, comportment or behaviour in terms of culturally acceptable disability discourses than to offer more enabling alternatives. While parents do resist – as we can see in this account above – it is often easy to explain away the ontological make-up of their children in terms of sticky labels such as 'oh, he's being autistic' or 'forgive him, he's ADHD' or 'it's his impairment', because these are culturally acceptable and expected ways of describing the ontologies of disabled children. Indeed, as Reeve and Thomas have noted, these cultural discourses ('out there' in the social world) inform internalised conversations about disability ('in there' of the psychological worlds of disabled children and their families). These cultural expectations threaten to promote ontological attacks on disabled people: viciously othering and marking the beings of disabled children and their families. The responses of non-disabled others to disabled children and their families described in the accounts above are not responses of demonic, violent, bad nor evil others. They are responses perfectly compatible with a culture of disablism that pathologises difference, individualises impairment and maintains ableism. This culture appears to equate proper care for disabled child with that of full time mothering. This culture places educational, health and social care professionals who work with disabled children in often low paid, high pressured and exacting conditions of employment. This culture has clear sight of what makes for normal childhood and what constitutes abnormality. Our view, then, is that these accounts of psychoemotional violence take place in cultures and systems. We follow Žižek's (2008: 53) point that attending only to subjective violence – enacted by social

agents or evil individuals – ignores the more systemic roots of violence. We move our analysis up a notch to systemic violence.

Systemic violence

> Systemic violence is the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems …We're talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only of direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination: including the threat of violence (Žižek, 2008: 1-8).

Unsurprisingly, many of the accounts of parents and encounters with children involved schools. Within these institutional systems disabled children are subjected to what many teachers like to refer to as the coal-face of education: the (grim) practical realities of mass schooling. Schools are highly stressful systems: subjected to league tables, children to endless tests, teachers to inspection. McLaren (2009) observes that the nationalization of curricula across schools not only allows comparison between schools, teachers and pupils on their efforts in science, maths and literacy but seeks to promote key skills in learners to be fit for advanced capitalist societies. Educational systems have therefore become increasingly folded into a market ideology that Barton (2004: 64) observes seeks to promote cost effectiveness, efficiency, and value for money leading to more competition, selection and social divisions. School systems have become infected by 'New Right' or neoliberal thinking which is tuned into individualistic understanding of human behaviour and achievement (Munford, 1994: 273); cherishing self-interest, self-contentment, selfishness and distrust (Ballard, 2004): this dance of capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in blessed indifference to how its movement will affect social reality (Žižek: 2008: 11). When

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children are deemed deficient, difficult or objectionable then they threaten these cherished ideals of childhood and the performativity of the school.

We have collected accounts of children's experiences of mainstream and special schools. Clearly, those children 'included' in mainstream settings were subjected to the rigours of marketisation. To some extents, the same could be said about special schools, which also increasingly face surveillance and performance management (Wedell, 2002). Across the different kinds of provision were responses to disabled children which might be understood as examples of systemic violence. Žižek's (2008) conceptualization of this phenomenon directs us to the fall-out that is created by institutional systems that seek order in the name of those systems. And, when the aims and meaning of education are couched in terms of accountability, achievement, reasonableness and containment – all key artifacts of the marketisation of education – then disabled children face the violence of educational enforcement; 'inherent *in* the system' (Žižek, 2008: 5; out italics).

> My experience of school going to the Christmas concert I saw similarly what I'd seen in nursery in that Andrew was dragged by the hand into the hall sat down and it was just like the naughty child really. I felt as a parent I wanted to be in there saying 'don't do that to my child'. You expect that people in educational establishments and with that sort of training wouldn't be doing these kinds of things and again from a parent's perspective you don't always feel comfortable with going in all the time, because you know you are classified as the parent who is always (Lucy).

Lining up, 'sitting nicely' and always putting your hand up before you speak, represent the regimented nature of schools. Andrew is an 'unruly' child who threatens to disrupt the smoothing practices of schools which promote the idealised image of a conforming child. While we accept the need for schools to be safe and calm places, it is perhaps ironic that the actions of the 'unruly' professional, who drags Andrew into the hall, escapes scrutiny while children's 'unruly' acts are all too often presented as evidence of their violent pathology. In this account we hear the constraining nature of the ordering of educational system on the child, parent and the professionals alongside the expectation that good professionals should behave better. This contradiction is at the heart of Žižek's notion of systemic violence which views violence as part of the maintenance of the system. The manhandling of the child into the hall is a direct product of a school system that requires regulation, governance and control. One should expect to see educational professionals 'doing these kinds of things' because educational professionals must act in such ways to fit the rigidity of systemic rituals.

> Kamil grabs another child with a hand covered in paint. The TA grabs him by the forearm and drags him to the corner of the room saying 'No! No!"and tells him it is not funny and not to smile. Kamil wanders around the room not involved in the painting activity, eventually he decides to join in the activity and sits down to take a paint brush. The teaching assistant takes it out of his hand (there is a minor struggle) and says 'paint finished' and gives him a coloured pencil instead. He loses interest and leaves the table again and begins to wander about the classroom (Katherine's ethnographic notes)

Following Žižek (2008: 11) violence against disabled children is real because it is felt, it hurts and it is wrong. But systems, such as schools, are more interested in the reality of the production of the system which may indeed lead to the threat of exclusion, movement and physical touch. Families experienced a plethora of educational systems ranging from family and children's centres, through to parenting classes and child development centres, each with their own systemic requirements:

> We were going to the [child development centre] for sessions every Thursday, they were just horrendous. Oh, I hated them. They did things like put you in a room on your own with your child and they have a two way mirror and I knew, I knew that they were doing that, but they thought they wouldn't tell me, but I knew someone who worked there, so they didn't tell me they were there. (Lesley).

At times these systems got under the skins of parents and their children: to their very emotions:

> The school made another parent's life hell, I mean she cried all the time, she was constantly, and I wouldn't I was determined I was not going to cry. I was scared to cry. I think if I'd started I wouldn't have been able to stop. So I just totally pushed all emotions, you know it was just fight, fight, fight all the time. (Lesley).

The systemic and the affective combine with one another for expression. 'Fighting the system' is a phrase that we have heard time and time again in our research. The very

workings of systems ensure that possible antecedents of real violence are never addressed:

> And the scary thing is that on occasion Sam's been in trouble for kicking somebody or pummelling somebody: "Well why did you do that Sam?" "Oh, because they [other pupils] told me to do it." And this is, you know, this is a whole area that absolutely terrifies the life out of me, because no matter how many times I go to school and say, "Sam does not come from a violent family, he doesn't see violence, he's not exposed to violence, so if he actually does physically hurt somebody, when you say to him, "Sam, did you do that?" – he's got Asperger's, he doesn't really lie, his brain doesn't work like that, he can't string together a whole story to throw us off the scent. He will say, "Yes, I hit whoever it was." And please could you take another two seconds to say, "Why did you do it?"" Because they never do. (Gayle)

We can read this story of Sam alongside Žižek's controversial though illuminating analysis of paedophilia in the church. He argues that, rather than regarding child sexual abuse as the actions of a few evil clergymen, we should view child sexual abuse as institutionalised within the church: 'such an *institutional unconscious* designates the obscene underside that sustains the public institution' (Žižek: 2008: 142). Hence, 'the church as an institution should itself be investigated with regards to the ways it systematically creates conditions for such crimes' (Ibid: 143). When we see these crimes against children – we see children being initiated into the culture of the church – showing the obscene 'pleasures' that sustain that culture (Ibid). Žižek's point is simple: the consistent, historical and widespread evidence of child sexual abuse in the church reveals obscene pleasures that have become institutionalised and systemic. Following this, then, it is possible to view systemic violence against

disabled children as revealing more about the underlying barbarism of civilisation (Ibid: 150) of schools. Violence against disabled children reflects a wider systemic intolerance for disabled, disrupted, unruly and different children. Their continued exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation is akin to being initiated into the exclusionary systems of schooling. Similar things could be said about the exclusionary nature of the institutionalised unconscious of schools. Indeed, we could argued that the exclusion of disabled children – their initiation in the culture of schools - takes on a particular flavour in light of the fact that many schools uphold themselves as inclusive. This could be read as the ultimate (and perhaps most barbaric) version of 'inclusion': an example of 'a superego of blackmail of gigantic proportions that claims to help the undeveloped with aids, credits, etc while ignoring its complicity in the development of exclusionary practices' (Ibid: 19). Clearly these examples reflect underlying cultural values and practices which legitimise systemic acts of violence, and it is the concept of cultural violence that underpins our final node of analysis.

Cultural violence

We have now come to the roots of the violence of disablism already described in this paper. Underpinning the real, psychoemotional and systemic acts of violence against disabled children is the cultural violence of disablism. It is possible to draw on Burman's (2008: 157) critical analysis of child/hood to suggest that disabled children violate the model of the happy, playing, discovering child. In some cases this may mean that the disabled child ceases to exist as a child – in terms of dominant cultural notions of childhood – and instead functions 'in order to restore our sense of

ourselves and the world we want' (Ibid. 159). Disabled children are brought together as a specific cultural site: the dumping ground for the projection of non-disabled society's fears of illness, frailty, incapacity and mortality (Shakespeare, 1997). Goodley (2010, fc,: 100) points to the *cultural fetishisation* of disabled bodies.

> Broadly speaking a fetish is that which we (mis) believe will sate our desires. In capitalist societies, the process of fetishisation describes the values that we inhere in objects or commodities that they do not intrinsically have. Fetishistic culture imbues objects with value (from sculpted pecs, to expensive wine, the latest iPhone, to pathological children and uncivilised nations). The disabled body is also a fetishized object, onto which are conferred a whole host of (unconscious) values, that sate a variety of values.

Disabled bodies are fetishised in a host of contradictory ways; as vulnerable, dependent, broken, tragic, exotic, uber-different, pathological, violent:

> The 'unfortunate person' is assumed to have wonderful and exceptional courage (although underneath this overt canonisation there is usually a degree of irritation and hostility which comes to light at moments of stress) (Hunt, 1966: 148).

Hunt's reflections capture the *cultural disavowal* (Goodley, fc, 2011) of disablism: a fascination with and fear of disabled people; staring at and staring through; loving and hating; an appealing and appalling sight. Disabling culture's ambivalent relationship with disability ensures that disabled people are split between contradictory positions: desired/rejected in equal measure. Žižek (2008: 71) proclaims that it is 'only psychoanalysis that can disclose the full contours of the shattering impact of modernity – that is, capitalism combined with the hegemony of scientific discourse –

on the way our identity is grounded in symbolic identifications'. While we are not totally seduced by the power of psychoanalysis (and are more than aware of its pathological, conservative and reactionary tendencies, see Goodley, 2010; Goodley, fc, 2011), we do share Žižek's belief that psychoanalytic concepts can be used to make sense of the cultural violence experienced by disabled people which are based in large part on a disavowal of the disabled person. Žižek argues that resentment and envy underpin even some of the most extreme forms of violence, such as fundamentalist religious acts of terror, revealing themselves to be resentment towards, but also envy of, their foes. Following Žižek, our attention should be less on these obvious forms of violence and more on the contradictions ingrained within the cultural psyche that continues to envy and resent disabled people in ways that leave them split as subjects and outcasts as cultural members. The following accounts reflect examples of cultural disavowal, which are often rendered invisible or mundane through the frequency of such events and their subsequent familiarity.

> You find an aisle [in the supermarket] big enough [for a wheelchair] and then they've stuck a bargain bin in the middle of it. And on top of that you've got people looking, well I don't mind the looking it is the staring and you've got people staring and then there's children saying 'what's that big boy doing in a buggy, mummy?" 'I don't know, darling' Instead of saying there might be something wrong with him and then walking off it is well let's not confront it, it is too awful. And I feel like saying, well that's my life, you know. But going to town with L makes me this person I'm actually not. (Shelley).

Becoming the 'person I'm actually not' powerfully relays the personal impact of a mother's anguish in being hit with the disavowal of a disabling community.

We also went on a train ride, at a kiddies animal park thing and I took my nephew, my sister-in-law and Hattie and myself and I handed over the 50ps and he [fairground attendant] gave me 50 p back and I said 'no, no it's alright that's the right money' and he said 'it is alright sweetheart', he said 'I never charge for retards (Lesley).

Here is the disavowal of disablism: the pathological 'hate' object that is also 'loved' to access free leisure activities. We might suggest that here we have a case of the disabled child so disavowed by the fairground attendant that, as Žižek (2008: p48) puts it quoting Gilles Deleuze , 'if you're trapped in the dream of the other: you're fucked'. One mother who has a child with the label of Down Syndrome told us that people had stopped her in the street when she was with her daughter pushing her in the push chair and asked, 'didn't you have the test?'. Natalie was also asked 'did you know they were going to be disabled before you had them?'. She thought that people were trying to gauge how sorry they felt for her – if she knew, before her daughter was born that she would be disabled the implication was that she was less deserving of their pity. Because disavowal is a contradictory act then a culture of disablism acts in equally ambivalent ways. In some cases this means distancing one's self from the Other 'The Other is just fine but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as the Other is not really there' (Žižek, 2008: 35):

Some people look at them [her children] going down the street and I've walked into bushes before especially when I've got the three of them. They look at me and go [open mouthed]. Their face, their mouths fall open which isn't hard sometimes and their head follows them and sometimes, my older children get very upset when I do this, I say do you want a photo of my beautiful children? Is that why you are looking? Is there something I can

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help you with?   Is there a question you'd like to ask me that you haven't had answered? Or would you like a photo next time pet? And the children go, 'please mum don't do that', and I don't now so much but once or twice it has when they have been with me and they have said 'why are you staring at my brothers and sisters? What is the matter with them?'

What we can pick up on in this account – in response to the cultural reactions to a disabled child - is what Žižek (2008: 45) describes as fetishist disavowal: I know that disability is bad, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know. Hence, the disabled child is culturally disavowed: potentially ignored or 'condensed into a caricature' (Ibid: 50): a monstrous/fascinating object to be gazed at and/or ignored. In making sense of these acts of cultural violence we are encouraged by Žižek to turn our attention to the pathological conditions of society. For example, he argues that Nazi anti-semitism was pathological because it relied upon:

> the disavowed libidinal investment into the figure the Jew … the cause of all social antagonisms was projected onto the 'Jew'; the object of a perverted love-hatred: the spectral figure of mixed fascination and disgust (Žižek, 2008: 85).

Similarly, we could argue that the violence of disablism becomes a cultural norm because disabled people come to occupy a figure invested as a disavowed libidinal object of both love and hate; fascination and disgust. But, because the disabled object is so near then disavowal takes on different qualities: 'the proximity' of the tortured subject which causes sympathy and makes torture unacceptable' (Ibid: 51) is responded to in less direct though equally as torturous ways; at least in terms of social conventions:

Shortly after that, the speech therapist at school who'd recently qualified on a feeding course, decided that one day at school she would feed Laurie. Well, she'd never fed him before and he choked, he coughed and she panicked and she made a decision that he would never be fed in school… they didn't ring me or anything, they sent him home with a letter having not fed him that day, he hadn't had a drink or anything and just to say they wouldn't feed him in school. And the speech therapist had said it so social services had to act on what the speech therapist was saying, so that meant I had not choice I had to if I wanted him to go to school, if I wanted to access respite care, we were in a position where we were being forced to have a gastro tube fitted. (Shelley)

Conclusions

Our analysis has tragically revealed a propensity for violence against disabled children ingrained in the relationships, institutions and cultural acts of our time. We worry that as contemporary economic conditions increase feelings of stress, disempowerment and poverty then these socio-economic conditions may well increase the violence of disablism. To tackle this violence means not simply targeting those few 'evil souls' responsible for hate crimes against disabled people but deconstructing and reforming the very cultural norms that legitimize violence against disabled people in the first place. Žižek (2008) offers us some hope for subverting this culture of violence. A key contribution lies in exposing the emptiness of a culture in which disabled children and their families continue to be disavowed. Žižek calls for a new ethics, following Levinas, of 'abandoning the claim to sameness that underlies universality, and replacing it with a respect for otherness' (Ibid: 47). Instead, we need:

to celebrate collective solidarity, connection, responsibility for dependent others, duty to respect the customs of one's community – instead of Western Capitalist culture's valuing of autonomy and liberal freedom (Žižek, 2008: 123)

This ethics can feed directly into disability activism, forms of education, health and social welfare and professional practice, which collectively work together to reduce violence against disabled people. This vision resonates with an ideal proposed by Finkelstein (1999a, 1999b) in his notion of the *profession allied to the community* (PAC). In contrast to professions allied to medicine, PACs refer to services and professionals that respond to and are led by the aspirations of disabled people and their representative organisations. Developing a PAC could bring into a production a 'virgin field of theory and practice through which professionals are re-engaged with the aspirations of disabled people' (Finkelstein, 1999b: 3). This virgin field incorporates ideas from critical disability studies and demands professionals to invest less time in pathological views of impairment (such as naturally associating challenging behaviour with intellectual disabilities) and more time in challenging the conditions of disablism (including violence). This field would requires professionals, for example, to address their own acts of psychoemotional disablism and disavowal which underpin the understandings they hold of the people they are paid to enable. The PAC turns the gaze back at the potential or pitfalls of relational, systemic and cultural responses to disability.

The real problem of disablism is, like most forms of ideology, that the subjective positions of cultural actors remain untouched (Žižek, 2008: 85). Attending to the cultural, systemic, psychoemotional and real elements of the violence of disablism ensures that we become more in tune with the everyday conditions of exclusion that

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lead, time and time again, to the ontological, cultural, community and physical exclusion of disabled children and their families. This might lead us to connect, respect and show solidarity with disabled children as we all fight for a non-violent life.

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[i] David Askew's was a 64 year old disabled man who suffered a heart attack when verbally abused by neighbours
(http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/david-askew-a-human-tragedy-and-national-scandal-1920089.html)

Raymond Atherton was beaten to death by a group of teenagers after years of abuse
(http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/aug/15/guardiansocietysupplement.socialcare)

Rikki Judkins died from a rock being dropped on his head by two young men
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/lancashire/6369319.stm)

Fiona Pilkington was killed by her own mother after the family had suffered years of abuse from local residents
(http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/sep/28/fiona-pilkington-suicide-mother-police)

Christine Lakinski died after an incident occurred in which a man urinated on her as she lay in a street of her local town
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/tees/7002627.stm)